

# Do portraits face the truth?

Sympathy or truth? You can reduce the history of portrait painting down to this question, and it makes the difference between art and a glorified photograph.

It's commonly thought that the photograph made portraiture artistically irrelevant, but that's a reduction. Picasso painted marvelous portraits. And look at what Francis Bacon did with Velazquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X.

There's the fact that portraits have always been money makers for artists, cash cows that allow them the freedom to paint what they really want. For reasons both vain and self-deceptive, the wealthy and the powerful love accurate (but flattering) paintings of themselves, seeking the immortality of art in what is almost invariably a soulless piece of canvas.



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No — a great portrait doesn't depend on realism for its greatness or even inventiveness (you can do that in Photoshop). It depends on truth.

When the Spanish royal family hired Francisco de Goya as the court painter, he went about painting people, not gods. The portraits all lack that absurd perfection that can make a portrait pathetically funny, puffed with self-importance.

Goya opted for truth and probably managed to keep his job because of the artistic ignorance of his patrons. Gautier said that Goya's painting of the royal family looked like "the corner baker and his wife after they won the lottery."

Modern portrait painting hasn't changed much since Goya's day really. Artists with the skill still pursue it for both money and as a very human form of expression.

Constance Edwards Scopelitis is a modern portrait painter. Her work, currently on view at Marion Meyer Contemporary Art (354 No. Coast Highway, through June 17), has me on the fence regarding the sympathy or truth question.

The gallery has six large-scale portraits on the walls. All are 84" x 36," oil on linen. All feature a single, full-sized figure with simple backgrounds. All the figures are looking directly at the viewer.

They all carry one-word, conceptual titles (as opposed to the names of the subjects), like "Maternal" or "Loyal." The four female figures are nude, the two male figures are clothed — one of them in bike shorts, as if the model were too modest. (This in itself somewhat disappointing — are we still upholding that double standard?)

Two of the paintings contain something of the allegorical. "Fertile" is a tongue-in-cheek Botticelli reference to his "Birth of Venus" that everybody knows. This Venus is on an oyster shell (complete with barnacles). Her slicked-back white-blond hair isn't long enough for her to

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modestly hide herself, as Botticelli would have her: She gazes straight ahead with open arms.

A tattoo of lilies is almost scrawled on her belly, emerging from her pubic hair. It's not clear to me why this is "Fertile," when the image is so sexualized — unless, of course, that's the point.

The other allegorical painting is "Unforgettable." This is the most successful portrait in the group. It features a young black man standing slightly to the side in front of a faintly rendered cinderblock wall. He wears baggy shorts and a crisp, royal blue shirt. The title word of the painting is graffitied behind him in tag letters. Weeds grow in the gap in the sidewalk; a single blood-red thistle blooms there.

His face is remarkable. He

smiles slightly, and his easy glance conveys something extraordinary about him that's hard to place. His face is accented by a halo that is full of forget-me-nots. Something in his rendering makes him more potent than the other figures in the show. There's more care with the paint here, more that is interesting and provocative, in spite of all his clothes. He is enigmatic and beautiful.

"Fertile" doesn't quite compare. It's true that there is skillful technique in her depiction, that all these figures are expertly rendered. They are even complex in their own ways — but there's something flat about the perfection at times, something that doesn't ring true.

The four portraits with plain grounds each attempt a kind of force that they don't always manage. "Maternal," which features a dark-skinned woman embracing a strategically-placed calla lily, was disturbing to me because of her unnatural pose. She seems uncomfortable or vaguely ashamed.

The background of each of these four was also troubling: heavy and uneven, it looks as if it were applied after the portraits were painted, making the figures sink a bit. This is especially true in "Maternal," but the black-and-white floor of "Abel" is too heavy and distracting, and tends to highlight weaknesses in the execution of the woman's form.

But having said all this, I should add that these are mixed feelings. The paintings each have, as the title of the show suggests, "the power of presence." But it seems to me that this is an artist poised to move in a different direction in her work. The skill and the vision is there. Is the truth?

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